

NOAA Lease For Emergency Tower Approved, Helipad Measure Receives Mixed Reaction

Senators advanced a lease with NOAA to boost weather forecasting and emergency communications, while the Caribbean Buzz lease for St. John's medevac helipad drew concern over the lack of formal healthcare partnerships and long-term government land use.

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The Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance on Friday considered several leases which are all expected to benefit the territory in times of emergency.

Among them was Bill No. 36-0062, an agreement between the Government of the Virgin Islands and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to lease a portion of the telecommunications tower located on Parcel R-22 of Tract I Estate Nazareth, No. 1 Red Hook

Quarter. It will allow NOAA to install “essential telecommunications infrastructure for weather forecasting and Emergency Broadcast Communications.” According to Senate President Milton Potter, “this partnership enhances the territory's disaster preparedness capabilities.”

The bill was previously heard in April and [held in committee](#) after several senators expressed concern over possible health implications for nearby residents. At that meeting, Senator Ray Fonseca referenced “frequencies and radio waves.” This time around, he joined Senator Dwayne DeGraff in voting against the bill. Senator Marvin Blyden did not vote, but the yes vote of the four other committee members ensured that the lease will be forwarded to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for consideration.

Bill 36-0098 will also be considered in an upcoming meeting of the Legislature’s clearing house committee. The bill details a lease between the GVI and Caribbean Buzz, LLC for a portion of Remainder Parcel No. 3B Estate Susannaberg, 17A Cruz Bay Quarter, St. John, to operate and manage a helicopter transportation service at the existing helipad. The lease is valid for twenty years with options to renew, with an annual rent of \$6,000 paid in \$500 monthly installments.

Operations Manager Charlotte Van Huerck told lawmakers that the lease “represents a vital solution to long-standing challenges faced by residents, visitors and emergency responders on the island of St. John.” Caribbean Buzz, LLC offers emergency medical evacuation by helicopter in its roster of services. “Once the ferries stop running in the evening, there's no reliable transportation to the island.”

“Caribbean Buzz will maintain and operate the existing helipad for medical evacuations and essential transport. We plan on investing over \$40,000 in improvements,” Ms. Van Huerck added, estimating a two-year timeline for completion of the upgrades. “This lease will deliver critical after-hours evacuation capability when ferry service is unavailable,” she said, urging support from lawmakers. “It's a long overdue and meaningful infrastructure improvement for an under-served island.”

Caribbean Buzz’s helicopters are not medically equipped, but are “currently configured to take the seats out quite easily...and easily put in medical equipment.” The company does not employ any medical personnel and expects that qualified staff would be provided through public-private arrangements. It prompted Senator Kurt Violet to ask whether Caribbean Buzz shared a formal working relationship with the Myrah Keating Smith Community Health Center.

When Ms. Van Huerck replied in the negative, Mr. Violet urged her to contact the leadership of MKSCHC and Schneider Regional Medical Center to initiate conversations on possible partnerships. “Then we would need to look at the necessary equipment that would need to be utilized to make that a reality. In the event that something happened three o'clock in the morning, you could easily take out the seat and strap everything in,” Senator Violet observed.

Others, like committee chair Senator Novelle Francis, encouraged Ms. Van Huerck to pursue formalized relationships with the government. But it was that lack of partnership that caused Senator Dwayne DeGraff to vote against the lease. “I can't agree with giving you a 20-year lease for government property. There's no MOU with a government entity to do what you choose to do because then you still run a commercial business....To give you a lease for government property at a clinic, I really don't agree with that. I think it is bad, bad business.”